

Envision 2040 Task Force
c/o Michael Brilliot, City of San Jose
Michael.Brilliot@sanjoseca.gov

Dear Task Force Members,

I am writing you in support of including Parks in the Envision 2040 General Plan Update. I and others have been working with the staff of the Parks, Recreation and Neighborhood Services (PRNS) Department on the Greenprint Update; a number of us (including me) were on the original 2000 Greenprint taskforce as well. As you can see from our individual letters, we share in the belief that good parks are vital for a great city.

An important park metric is the *amount* of parkland. The Greenprint calls for 3.5 acres of neighborhood parks per thousand residents. This is an acceptable, but not overly generous number – many other cities do better – and it is critical that the number not be lowered. Many developers pay the Parkland Dedication Ordinance (PDO) “in-lieu fees” in place of actually providing the land for parks, and these fees are pegged to the price of land in the vicinity and the number of acres required. If the 3.5 A/1000 value were to be reduced, then the PDO park fees collected from developers would shrink proportionately, and parks would suffer.

Another important metric is the *distribution* of the parkland. The City is shifting from a target of “a park within 3/4th of a mile” to a more ambitious “a park within 1/3rd of a mile” goal. While this is laudable, it can overlook the *quality* of the park. It does little good to place a single small tot-lot in amongst a cluster of high-rise housing and then claim that every single resident is within a third of a mile of a park. And also it does little good to say that, citywide, the 3.5 A/1000 level is met if the high-density housing is clustered in, say, North San Jose while the majority of the parkland may be in Almaden. (I do not mean to mean San Jose should avoid all pocket-parks: in some of the more densely developed areas of the city, they provide the only relief from the urban experience.)

And then there is the question of “what *is* a park?” San Jose is one of the few cities that count school playgrounds in the calculations. And while schools often do have playgrounds, they frequently are closed to the general public (especially during the school-day), as the school administrators are concerned about maintenance, liability, and student safety. And, unless the City had bought the land in the first place and leased it to the schools (as per the original Greenprint’s policy “E”), then the school board is free to sell of the land if/when the school closes. Yes, the City is legally granted the first-right-of-refusal, but it still has to come up with the money on short notice.

My personal interest is in trails and pathways. I am especially heartened by co-chairs Sam Liccardo and Shirley Lewis’s recent memo: this is the “vision” that I had felt was missing from the Greenprint Update! This is Silicon Valley: our vision can be “Distributed Parklands”, or perhaps “Park-Net 2.0”! Have the Guadalupe Park chain, including the Gardens by the airport, the Arena Green by Confluence Point, and the Discovery Meadows by the Children’s Discovery Museum, as the axis of the park,

connected by a trail system and extending outward to Kelley Park (via the Three Creeks Trail) with its Zoo, Japanese Gardens, and History Museum. Just as recent successful Olympic events have been distributed across an urban environment rather than being concentrated into a single venue, our “Central Park” can be an interconnected network of trails and nodes. San Jose does have the potential to be a trail-user’s paradise – the climate is perfect, the topography is great (flat in the urban areas, challenging climbs in the surrounding hills), and the variety presented by the microclimates and ecologies (redwoods, baylands, streamsides, and the urban experience) is wonderful!

The Update to the Greenprint needs some improvements so that this vision isn’t sold short:

- The original Greenprint included many of the regional trails, along with specific details of what remained to be accomplished (for example, it recognized that the Los Gatos Creek Trail Master Plan calls for a bridge from the trail to Willow St. just west of Meridian). The proposed updated Greenprint deliberately omits showing this link, as well as the link from Confluence Point to the River St. District (part of the Guadalupe River plans) and I don’t know how many others.
- Maintain the vision. We asked that the Update include a study for closing the gap in the Los Gatos Creek Trail (Meridian to Lincoln), which would have been indicated with an ellipse on the map to indicate a study: this has been omitted from the final draft.
- The original Greenprint envisioned the conversion of abandoned rail lines to trail, such as the Willow Glen Spur becoming the Three Creeks Trail. Instead, the final draft of the Update downgrades the Three Creeks Trail to an ellipse on the map with the caption “study area for most feasible east-west connection” – in effect, abandoning the dream of a linear park and opting to accept a bike-lane on Alma as a substitute.
- Indeed, even the language in the list of Goals has changed: The original Greenprint policy “J” said that trails should be “established” on abandoned railroad rights-of-way, whereas the replacement text in the Update (Action Item F.2) just says that the City should “evaluate” the trail alignments. So, by this new policy, the City has already met all of its obligations to the public on the Three Creeks Trail: they have looked at it.
- Also: the original Greenprint had a policy “G” that addressed trail standards. We were told it was dropped from the Update because PRNS already follows County and CalTrans trail standards. But then there should be a new policy stating that PRNS *will continue* to follow those County and CalTrans trail standards.
- Another detail: the original Greenprint policy “I” said that Trails & pathways should be designed to be “accessible”, whereas new B.3 talks about accessibility design of “parks”, but doesn’t call out trails and paths specifically. My concerns:
1: the park may have accessible regions, but the trail going through it might not be accessible; and
2: what about trails and paths (e.g., 3 Creeks Trail) that aren’t part of a “park”?

I and others on the Taskforce felt “underwhelmed” by the Update, and were disappointed by the lack of vision. The Update is just a mid-course correction to the 20-year strategic plan developed in 2000: it does not extend the event horizon, but merely

tweaks some of the minor details. The Update will now only cover a 10-year period, still ending at 2020: this is not a true companion for the Envision 2040 General Plan Update.

The Greenprint Update should be expanded to accommodate the new vision coming from the Envision 2040 Task Force, as expounded in the memo. It also needs to recognize that the city will no longer be a sea of detached single-family dwellings, but instead will be clusters of higher-density “villages” along transit corridors and at “hubs”. The Greenprint Update should recognize the need for village-squares and town-plazas, and the need for pathways that would make the villages walkable; it needs to recognize that a scattering of tot-lots is insufficient to serve the demographics of the emerging future city.

We want to see San Jose become a great walkable, sustainable city. We need great parks to make this happen: it does not need to be a single site – it can be a distributed network of nodes. But it is critical for the General Plan Update to recognize the need for parks and trails in the General Plan, and not simply attach the Greenprint by reference. There are a lot of worthwhile material and good policies in the Greenprint, which can be strengthened so as to reinforce the vision. Please help us enhance the Greenprint, and then give it teeth by incorporating the appropriate Greenprint policies and recommendations into the Updated General Plan.

Thank you,

Larry Ames,
park and trail advocate, and Member of the Greenprint Update Taskforce.
